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## **THE BLIND FINCH: EXPANDING THE ROLE OF DISABILITY IN HERITAGE STUDIES**

### **EL JILGUERO CIEGO: EXTENDIENDO EL PAPEL DE DISCAPACIDAD EN ESTUDIOS DE PATRIMONIO**

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#### **Abstracts**

Since a couple of decades there has been an increased interest in the heritage sites located in the West of Flanders (Belgium) and directly connected to the First World War. The commemoration of the Great War planned for the centennial anniversary only has spurred that particular attention even more. Re-enactments, war museums, graveyards, monumental commemorative buildings and traditions, and even the landscape itself all seem to remember and transform the material world of the West of Flanders into a huge and all-encompassing heritage site.

#### **Keyword**

Belgium – Heritage – Disability Studies

#### **Resumen**

Desde un par de décadas ha habido un incremento por el interés en lugares heredados ubicados en el oeste de Flandes (Bélgica) y directamente conectados a la Primera Guerra Mundial. La conmemoración de la Gran Guerra planeada para el aniversario del centenario sólo ha incentivado esta particular atención aún más. Representaciones, museos de guerra, cementerios, monumentales y conmemorativos edificios y tradiciones, e incluso el paisaje completo, por sí mismo parece recordar y transformar el mundo material del oeste de Flandes en un inmenso y completo lugar rodeado de herencia.

#### **Palabras Claves**

Belgica – Patrimonio – Investigación en discapacidad

## Introduction

Since a couple of decades there has been an increased interest in the heritage sites located in the West of Flanders (Belgium) and directly connected to the First World War. The commemoration of the Great War planned for the centennial anniversary only has spurred that particular attention even more. Re-enactments, war museums, graveyards, monumental commemorative buildings and traditions, and even the landscape itself all seem to remember and transform the material world of the West of Flanders into a huge and all-encompassing heritage site. Although the commemorative initiatives are all dealing with what happened a hundred years ago and the material remains of the war ceaselessly remind us of the cruelty and brutality that tormented Europe for around 56 months, it nevertheless seems that history itself slipped through the meshes of the contemporary commemorative grid. As argued by some leading Belgian historians, notably Sophie de Schaepdrijver, the commemoration seems to be more centred around politics, tourism, and economics than innovative historical scholarship (De Schaepdrijver, 2013). The recent announcement in Belgian media that instead of the 400.000 expected annual visitors the region around Ypres would soon welcome 700.000 visitors on an annual basis can prove that statement.

Given this absence of history in the current commemoration of the First World War we will develop in this article a historical narrative that 1/ will demonstrate the role played by the Great War in the prohibition of a particular sport practiced in Flanders and 2/ will show how disability can play a different role than it has been attributed up till now in heritage studies. The local sport which history will be traced back is called 'Vinkensport' in Dutch or finch sport in English, and has been practiced for more than 400 years in Flanders and northern France. The sport was recently described by a *New York Times* reporter in the following way:

“The timekeeper waves a large red flag. Spectators wait in hushed anticipation. The nearly featherweight rivals – including Rambo and Duracel – are surrounded by nervous trainers. But the event is not a boxing or a wrestling match. The one-ounce contestants, with grey caps and blue beaks, will be judged on how many ‘susk-e-wiets’ they can tweet in an hour from inside a wooden box” (Bilefsky, 2007).

The sport referred to in this article was officially recognized as a cultural heritage by the Flemish Minister of Culture, Joke Schauvliege in 2013. We will use the history of finch sport add another perspective to the dominant ways in which disability and persons with disabilities up till now have been included in heritage studies.

Until now, disability has mainly been approached from two dominant perspectives, the first being accessibility of heritage sites and the safeguarding of heritage related to persons with disabilities. Especially since the 1990's, when educational, political and cultural agendas have been increasingly steered by an inclusionary approach, scholars have begun to pay attention to how existing and new heritage sites could be rendered more accessible for persons with disabilities. These discussions not only touched upon the issue of physical accessibility aiming at re-building or conceiving the heritage sites in such a way that also persons with sensory and/or physical disabilities are able to visit these (Goodall, 2006; Poria, Reichel and Brandt, 2009). They also dealt with accessibility for persons with learning difficulties by asking whether the information provided on site is intelligible to them (Rix, 2006; Rix, Lowe and The Heritage Forum, 2010).



Second, the move to inclusionary societies and the emancipation of persons with disabilities themselves also lead to an increased interest in the heritage of or related to persons with disabilities themselves. Notably, Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky's 2001 anthology *The New Disability History* marked a renewed and refreshed interest in the rich and to a large extent underexplored history of disability (2001). Taken together, both the move to an inclusionary society and the plea for including disability as an historical category in its own right just like gender, class, and race (Kudlick, 2003), lead to the publication of studies that critically explored the history of for example the Paralympic heritage (Brittain, Ramshaw and Gammon, 2013), the place of disability in museum collections (Sandall and Thomson 2010) or the history of deaf culture in Belgium (Scheiris and Ramaekers, 2007). The way that monuments depict people with disabilities has also been questioned, most notably in the controversy surrounding the Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial in Washington D. C. (Mutchler, 1995)

Without denying the value of these approaches we would like to argue that these do not completely cover the different roles 'disability' can play within heritage studies. By focussing on the history of finch sport in Belgium we will demonstrate that, besides issues of accessibility and safeguarding the history of disability/persons with disabilities, disability has often played a central role in the very shaping of cultural heritage.

### **Blindness and the history of finch sport**

Finch sport is a contest for finch-owners traditionally practiced on Sunday mornings in the East- and West-Flanders and northern France (Broeckhove, 1969). Although the sport is still practiced, it is definitely not as widespread as in its heyday of the 1970's and -80's, when the Flemish association of finch owners counted around 20.000 members. The game consists of finch owners placing cages in a row on a public street with a distance of 240 cm. in between each cage. The owners then move to the cage of their neighbour and count the number of times that bird repeats the particular finch sound, "suskeviet". The oldest description of this kind of contest dates back to 1595 and represents a scene in which finch owners compete with each other in order to elect a bird-king, (Santens, 1995). Until the end of the eighteenth century, the sport was mainly practiced in aristocratic circles, as for a very long time only noblemen were entitled to hunt and catch birds. It was only after 1795, when the region of what we nowadays call Flanders was taken over by the French, that finch sport became popular. The French authorities had dismissed the privilege of hunting and catching birds during the revolution of 1789, and thus also lesser off people could own finches, which contributed to the democratization of finch sport in Flanders (Kete, 2013).

In the nineteenth century, finch sport became a popular sport for the working classes. Simultaneously, a particular practice connected to keeping and training the birds caught attention: Already in an edited volume of poetry published in 1636 by J. Zoet one can read that "If the finch is blind, then he sings the best" (Quoted in Broeckhove, 1969: 35). The reason for blinding the birds was to make them less prone to be distracted and frightened by things that happened around them. Besides the enhanced concentration, it was also thought that the blinding of the birds would put them in a solitary state, an idea echoing the image of people with sensory disabilities as solitary beings (Verstraete, 2009). This would cause it to produce more sound in an attempt to locate other finches with which he could communicate, and thus alleviate his condition.

In order to blind the birds, the following procedure was followed: After having caught the bird by means of a special net the bird was placed for eight to ten days in a darkened cage, so that it could accustom itself to eating and drinking without being able to see. After this period of transition the bird was taken out of its cage and the owner of the bird gradually approached the burning point of a needle or piece of wire to the eyelids of the finch. In order to protect its eyes the bird would close them. The heat then would burn the closed eyelids together so that, in the end, the bird would be completely blinded (Abbé Rémy, 1779: 153). Although it seems unlikely, it was said that this blinding of the birds was reversible and that the eyelids could be opened by rubbing them with a saltless grease. Some Dutch words, like 'putogen' (literally translated into English: 'pit-eyes', however, indicate that also another procedure was used which consisted of removing the eyeballs by means of a spoon.

If throughout the nineteenth century, finch sport was almost exclusively practiced with blind finches and the practice of blinding the birds continued to exist until the 1920's, it became increasingly thought of as problematic. In the nineteenth century, animal protection became a prominent political issue, changing the attitudes towards and treatment of animals (2002, 25). This, in turn, affected many popular entertainments: In her study of Dutch folklore, Marjolein Efting Dijkstra, for example, has recorded a wide variety of games using and abusing animals. Attempts at curbing such practices were recorded as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, although at first on the basis of them being connected to other vices such as gambling and drunkenness. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, criticism of the cruelty towards the involved animals began to surface and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emerging movement for animal protection picked up the issue (Efting Dijkstra, 2004). Birds in particular had an exceptional position in 19<sup>th</sup> century animal protection societies: Their vital function in the ecosystem and thus for agricultural production was emphasized, but they were also thought of as moral models, whose mating and other behaviour corresponded to contemporary ideals of love and faithfulness, and therefore especially worthy of protection (Dirke, 2014). When Charles Darwin presented his studies showing the similarities between emotional responses in humans and animals, the animal protectionists were able to support their calls for empathy with other species with science (Mayer, 2008). In the wake of this rise of animal protection thinking also the blinding of finches increasingly became the subject of criticism in literary journals, daily newspapers, and political forums until it eventually was prohibited in 1928.

In the discussions about and arguments against the blinding of the finches emotions take on an important role. The history of the interconnectedness of animals, persons with visual disabilities and emotions in an entertainment context dates far back. One example is a game that was practiced in the Middle Ages and consisted in placing two blind persons together with a pig in a kind of boxing ring. The two blind persons were given bats and asked to try to hit the pig. The first one who was capable of hitting the pig was the winner of the game (Richard, 2013; Weygand, 2003: 28). Whereas in this case, blindness and animals were connected to each other by means of humour and laughter, the case of the finch rather puts other emotions like pity, sorrow and unhappiness on the forefront.

In 1841, for example, the literary journal *Kunst- en letterblad* featured an article on "The blinded little winter finch" under the heading "Folklore". The author of the piece introduced his story in the following way: "Let us tell the heartbreaking story of the poor little winter finch, and we will encounter the history of an inhumane custom which still is practiced in every corner of civilized Belgium" (Van De Velde, 1841: 30; Translation PV). The touching story starts by depicting a farm where the finch diverts the peasant when he comes home by singing his famous songs from the branches of a high pear tree. When the pear tree is



cut down, however, and the birds finds itself homeless and starts to utter miserable sounds from the rood of the farm, the peasant catches it and puts it in a little cage. The result of its imprisonment is that the bird becomes unhappy: “The loss of freedom discourages the unblessed bird; In what way can he still profit from his wings?” (Van De Velde, 1841: 30; Translation PV). Disappointed by the sight and sound of the miserable condition of the finch the peasant decides to sell the bird to a finch dealer, who eventually blinds the bird:

All of a sudden the finch dealer covers the cage with a dark veil. Two days and two nights pass by in restlessness, when a strong hand squeezes the miserable corps in between the tendinous fingers, while a murderous instrument will deprive him of the most precious gift that the Lord gave him to admire nature – the only consolation that was left for him. The fowler unmercifully approaches the bird with a glowing piercer and ... oh cruelty! The frail eyelids close themselves eternally to the light – The only thing that can console him is death itself! – But what am I saying? Death itself runs from him, because the sound of a female bird imitated faithfully by the fowler moved him and the singer, blind as he finds himself, just like Homer, who seems to have heard the sound of his beloved one, pours its sadness out of its bleeding heart and let it echoing in the eager ear of his murderer without it leading to the awakening of pity in that fiend (Van de Velde, 1841: 31; Translation PV).

The author then continues to emphasize the barbaric nature of the fowler by describing the bacchanal festivities that follow upon the victory of one of the finches in a competition and contrasts the cruel attitude towards the birds with the pity that these bird owners feel when being confronted with a blind/ed man:

“One cheers upon the health of the winner, glasses are tapped against each other and the beer streams through the hoarse throats of these executioners; executioners who know how precious is the dear light, who pity the blind and weep in front of the painting of Belisarius” (Van de Velde, 1841: 31; Translation PV).

Why do those finch owners not feel the same pity while blinding the birds as when confronted with the famous blind man Belisarius? Apparently the author of this folklore tale beliefs finch owners in particular – and perhaps humans in general – consider disability only to provoke pity when it deals with humans. The pity one feels when looking at or being confronted with a blind man is absent when one considers the cruelty displayed by the finch owners while blinding their birds. A similar distinction between the emotional presence of disability in human beings and animals can be found in an 1883 article in the weekly French pedagogical *Journal des instituteurs*, where the following oral exercise was suggested to teachers (323): The teacher was to read aloud a text about the complaint of a blind finch and then ask the student to summarize the story and analyse it grammatically:

### Complaint from a blind finch

Good people, be silent; listen to me for a moment. If I raise my voice; it is to complain about the treatment I suffered, about the harm that was inflicted to me by man, a being informed and sensitive, placed at the forefront of creation and by some even said to be the image of God. Without pity, he took away my light, touching my eyes with a hot iron. An unhappy creature I am! I still sing, but no one feels my pain.

The appearance of the sky delights you; you are charmed by the blossoming fields. Also I myself followed with pleasure the progress of the bug, and I was singing full throat.

Now my hollow orbits seek in vain the light of day. Eager for a ray of light, I am plunged into eternal night.

If you are sensitive to the complaint of the imprisoned singer, poor and blind, recommend to your brothers not to be harsh and cruel at this point (Van de Velde, 1841: 31; Translation PV).

Both authors ask the reader to empathize with the bird like they would with a human being. Corresponding with the emerging animal protection discourse, the finch is imagined as having emotions that go beyond simple reactions such as physical pain and fear – it is capable, even, of love and unhappiness. Pain, in fact, the actual process of mutilating the bird, does not appear to be the main issue, but instead, it is the resulting blindness that the bird is pitied for, thus casting the animal as disabled, a social category usually reserved for human beings. The presupposition is that blindness equals unhappiness in the shape of isolation and deprivation of visual delights, and that also a bird would grieve the loss of its sight. This supposed emotional similarity between the human and animal species requires us to empathize with the birds and not expose them to suffering.

Moreover, from the two preceding examples it becomes clear that disability in a way functioned as a point of contact between the realm of man and that of nature/animals. Given the scientific developments in biology – and in particular the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin – the Enlightened distinction between man and animals gradually was countered by a view in which animals and humans resembled each other while not completely being interchangeable. One of the things that lead to the destruction of the human/animal divide was the affliction of disability. The mutilation thus amounted to an anthropomorphing process that allowed the birds to speak to the public and encourage them to apply the same emotional attitudes one had when confronted with a disabled humans to the disabled birds. What we can see here is completely opposed to the monsters one can see in Parés *On Marvels and monsters* (1575/1995). In this medieval treatise on the causes of monstrosity the world still contained creatures that were human and animal at the same time. Although the belief in the wholeness of nature was lost during the Enlightenment, the blind finch and the emotions one was asked to have when being confronted with them remind us of the fact that in the West, disability was said to have dehumanizing effects. The strict divide between human beings and animals was endangered by the affliction of a human condition – impairment – to the animal who echoed something of the monsters evoked in Parés book.

Parallel to the growing concern about animal rights, finch sport was also increasingly controversial under an economic, educational, and political viewpoint. Since catching birds, for finch sport or as a hobby in itself, was such a popular pastime, some feared that it would endanger the ecosystem and hence impede agricultural productivity. The cultural importance of catching birds becomes clear from a passage in a letter addressed to the director of the Royal Institute for the Deaf in Bruges, where the deaf boy Charles Steenhuyse explains that this particular practice of his peers made him feel different and lesser than them. Due to the fact that he was unable to hear the sound, he could not locate the bird's nest:

I really liked birds and I climbed trees to look for their nests. The other children found a lot of baby birds and I only rarely found a little nest. I envied those boys. They noticed it and made it clear to me that I could not hear and that my deafness was the cause of me not finding a lot of young birds; that they heard them scream in their nests and heard where they lived; that was very

painful for me. I knew then that I was deaf-mute, that I was unhappy (Steenhuyse, 1861; Translation PV).

As this recollection shows, catching birds, an activity requiring hearing, was an integral part of growing up as a Flemish boy, so central that it was this custom that made Steenhuyse realize that he was different to his peers. Not the communication barrier, the realization that others spoke in a language he did not understand, made him experience being different. Apparently, that gap could be bridged as he refers to communicating with the hearing boys, but not being able to take part in catching birds marked him as an outsider.

At the same time, however, as already became clear from the preceding examples, this cultural heritage increasingly began to be viewed as an uncivilized custom that was an economical, moral, and cultural threat to a modernizing society.

In a book that contains a chapter entitled “Apology of the blind finch”, the Flemish author Sylvain Wittouck too refers to the useful character of the finch in an attempt to convince the authorities to pass legislation that would prohibit the peddling of birds in general and the blinding of finches in particular (1903). Remarkable here is to note that to Wittouck, the problem not only dealt with adults, but that also the behaviour of children needed to be adjusted. In the preface to the book he refers to the time when he himself was a young boy. As all youngsters at that time, he had a passion for catching birds. He recalls vividly how he was overwhelmed by joy and happiness when they were able to locate a bird nest and collect the eggs or baby birds. According to Wittouck, these habits were indigenous in the region where he lived and needed to be eradicated by good advice and conviction (Wittouck, p. 5). Besides educational issues, the discussion about the possible prohibition of blinding finches also touched upon other political goals and reminds us of Kete’s statement that “the protection of animals in the nineteenth century figured in a formula of social control” (2002: 27).

Being a working man’s pastime, finch sport became a symbolic issue in the conflict between the right- and left wings in the Belgian parliament. In May 1867, the issue of blinding finches was addressed in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives for the first time. The custom was touched upon in a discussion regarding a proposition to modify article 559 of the Belgian penal code. Chapters 5 and 6 aimed directly at prohibiting cruel acts towards animals. Chapter 5 stated that those who were guilty of committing cruel acts or excessive maltreatment of animals would be punished with a fine of 10 to 20 Belgian Francs or, in case of repeated offences, imprisonment of 8 to 10 days. The same rule would be applied to those who would subject animals to torture on the occasion of combats, games or spectacles (Chambre de représentants, Séance du 10 mai 1867, 975). An amendment to this was presented in which the authors asked for the exemption of cockfights from this legal regulations. In the accompanying speech one of the authors made reference to the reasons that lead the legislator to include these regulations towards animal fights and the torturing of animals. The organization of games like cockfights presumably would lead to quarrels and gambling in particular and social disorder in general. By emphasizing the fact that the legislator did not target horse racing, where it also could be said that the animal was tortured, the authors of the amendment implied that this bill was just another way to bully and control the poor classes and rural population. The political nature of the discussion, however, went much further, and asked what was more important: the liberty of an animal that was born to fight, like the cock, or the liberty of man to organize games to make his Sundays agreeable as possible (Chambre de représentants, Séance du 10 mai 1867, 997). Passing the bill, they

argued, would be a slippery slope. Not only the organizers of cockfights would be targeted , but “if one could punish all those who subject animals to torture, well, the floor not only would have to intervene in cockfights, but also in canary fight, in finch contests where one blinds in order to make them sing better. This would be the consequence of the declaration of the Minister of Justice: the chiefs of the floor would say that this or that horse was unnecessarily excited in a run, that one made it jump a little bit too high ... another one would pretend that it is bad to blind the poor birds in order to make them sing” (I Chambre de représentants, Séance du 10 mai 1867,. 978; Translation PV).

Although the amendment was dismissed and the new bill was passed, it apparently did not result in the eradication of cockfights, nor the blinding of finches, for in the following decades there were repeated petitions to end the practice (see for instance Séance du 2 Juillet 1889, 23 Janvier 1900, 10 Octobre 1901, 25 Mars 1904, 20 Mars 1908). In 1909, the issue appeared again in a fierce discussion about the inhuman treatment of labourers in the Walloon mining industry (Séance du 12 Février). The living conditions Walloon miners had to face were said to be inhuman and not in line with civilization. Not only did they have to work in darkness and unhealthy air, but their hours were also too long. To improve their condition, the orator demanded the introduction of the 8-hour-day and compulsory education. Together, this would create spare time that the educated, and thus civilized and moral worker, would use wisely and not on brutal customs such as finch sport:

He (the educated labourer) will not turn to these kind of sports that are as disgusting as the favourite sports of the rich classes; for I do not consider the ferocious distraction of making a horse run on the fields more immoral than the barbaric game one calls pigeon shooting, the shameful pastime of cockfighting or the practice of the pricking of the eyes of those poor birds. All of these are morals that go along the same line, they symbolise a return to ancient bestiality, they represent shameful actions which one should fight and prevent (vivid approbation from the left). The intelligent and healthy labourer will not surrender himself to these miserable occupations (Séance du 12 février 1900 699; Translation PV).

The orator of this emotional speech, clearly belonging to the left spectrum of the political scene at that time, tried to counter the existing belief that the reduction of the working time inevitably would lead to labourers devoting themselves to vice and crime. The effect of closing the mines a bit earlier would not be that the labourers go to cafés or cabarets, but instead, the schools would profit from this creation of free time. The introduction of compulsory education and the reduction of working time would eventually invite the labourers to go along the path of civilization and not only would give a boost to the economy but also would lead to the eradication of such shameful practices as blinding fragile and innocent birds.

In the above-mentioned texts cultural, economic and moral arguments were used in order to plea for the promulgation of a law that would prohibit the blinding of finches.. As it turned out however, it was not until disability entered the stage that the tables turned and a ban on blinding finches was finally reached. In what follows, we will show how the pupils of the Royal Institute for the Deaf-Mute and the Blind in Brussels as well as the blinded Belgian veterans of the First World War were instrumental in the process that eventually would lead to the prohibition of blinding finches in 1928.

## **Persons with disabilities and the history of finch sport a parliamentary petition of blind pupils**

When going through the minutes of the debates that were held in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives between 1860 and 1930, we found that on December 27<sup>th</sup> 1901, the blind pupils of the Brussels Royal Institute for the Deaf-Mutes and the Blind send a petition to the Chamber in which they called for the cruel practice of blinding finches to be outlawed. Although we have been unable to retrieve the original petition, some sources let it appear that it was sent to the Chamber in embossed printing (Den Denderbode, 26 januari 1902). In the minutes of the debates held at the Chamber of Representatives a transcription of the original petition can be found:

We blind students of the Royal Institute for Deaf and Dumb and Blind Woluwe-Saint-Lambert [sic]. Painfully observing that the barbarous custom of blinding little birds, finches and linnets, still exists and is increasingly practiced in our country, and considering this custom as a monstrosity unworthy of our motherland and epoch;

That it perverts the character and heart of children;  
That it takes its toll on the most useful birds to agriculture;  
That there is no plausible reason which can legitimize or excuse [it];  
That its abolition, even by legal means, is desired by all right-thinking men;  
That we, the blind, have particular reasons for desiring this abolition;

That better than anyone, we know the horrors of the deep and perpetual night in which children, even men, insensitively plunge these innocent and charming creatures, because, for their barbaric ears the moans and cries of distress are songs of music even more delightful than the cheerful songs of happiness;

That for us the beautiful nature is not the starry sky, not the dawn of the morning nor the evening twilight; [it] is not the countryside with its green meadows, flower gardens, its yellowing harvests; is not, in a word, the magnificent painting that the eternal Painter continuously exposes to the gazes of other men.

That our nature for us, are the thousands of voices, which from the sky, show to our attentive soul the splendor of the creation, the greatness, goodness and the love of the Creator; these thousands of voices that have so much charm to our ears, which make the night less dark and life more joyful; these thousands of lovely voices that cruel and sacrilegious hands want to transform into plaintive groans, which cause our sensitive heart to bleed;

Finally, considering that this barbaric custom is an insult to our infirmity, as the generous care society provides us with, the sacrifices it imposes in order to relieve us from the miserable state blindness condemns us to, contrast enormously with the heartless indifference with which that same society permits to deprive of sight such useful creatures, harmless, which in many respects are entitled to its kindness, its gratitude.

We urge the minister of agriculture, MM. Senators and MM. representatives kindly to give us a law that forbid the blinding of these birds  
Hoping, gentlemen, that you will not be insensitive to the prayer of the blind, we offer the most respectful homage to our early recognition (Séance du 17 avril 1902, 1216; Translation PV).

The petition of the blind pupils was included in the final report of a commission appointed by the Minister of Agriculture to take a closer look on the issue of blinding finches and see whether it indeed was necessary to take some judicial steps. The secretary of this commission, H. Colfs, presented the petition at the very end of his report and considered it the penultimate argument to take additional actions. This is how he introduced the petition: “We do hope that the voices of these unfortunates will be heard. Their terrible infirmity permits them to judge better than anyone else the atrocity of the torture inflicted to these defenceless birds” (Séance du 17 avril 1902, 1216; Translation PV). After having referred to an educational, moral, and political argument, the secretary presumably thought to win the hearts and minds of his audience by referring to the supposedly unhappy state and eternal night blind persons find themselves in. The educational argument questioned the example set to children by blinding finches and rhetorically asked whether they consequently not also would be inclined to harm their relatives. The moral argument referred to the fact that the competitions of finch sports – just like any other game wherein animals were involved – inevitably lead to orgies and most of the times were organized in taverns. The agricultural argument dealt with the observation that each year, thousands of little birds were captured and blinded, endangering the production of cereals, vegetables and fruit – as these birds were no longer there to catch and eat insects. The ultimate argument, however, was the personal plea of a group of persons who knew first-hand what it was to live in an eternal night and be confined to the limits blindness sets to human life.

As we have argued elsewhere, the idea that disability and unhappiness are intimately bound together gradually appeared in the nineteenth century and was a powerful argument directors of institutes for persons with visual and auditory disability made use of in order to legitimize their educational efforts: their institute and the education provided eventually would enable them to become happy citizens (Verstraete and Söderfeldt 2014; See also Söderfeldt and Verstraete 2013). What is interesting here, is to see how this presumed unhappy state of persons with disabilities was not only referred to by Colfs, but also echoed in the petition of the blind themselves. Around 1900, happiness clearly had obtained such an important position in society that it not only frequently was referred to in order to describe the conditions of the blind and consequently the need for them to be transformed/educated. It also was directive in the sensitization of the public with regard to animal rights as the emotional argument easily became applied to the realm of nature. Blindness was not only thought to cause unhappiness in the human mind, but also animals inflicted by blindness would become unhappy creatures.

If Colfs turned to the presumed unhappy state of the blind pupils who wrote the petition, the blind pupils themselves, however, made use of the emotional argument centred around happiness in a rather ambivalent way. Based on the assertions of the blind pupils, it becomes clear that they partly agree with the description of blind persons as unhappy. This becomes clear from the passage where they make reference to the generous care society provides in order to “relieve them from the miserable state blindness condemns them to”. It thus could be argued that the blind pupils during their stay at the institute had incorporated the views towards blindness that were dominant at that time. They echoed the opinions of their instructors and those who wanted to alleviate their sort. This interpretation, however, only seems to a certain degree correct.

On the basis of this petition, it cannot be said that the blind pupils considered themselves entirely unhappy. On the contrary, the blind pupils seem to have inserted in the petition a counter-narrative to the dominant view regarding the emotional state of blind persons. Their unhappiness seems to be the result of the catching and blinding of the birds

for they experienced happiness through their ears. In line with the important place taken on by sound and hearing towards the end of the nineteenth century, these blind pupils made their happiness dependent on what they could hear in their environment. One of the sounds that rendered them happy was endangered by the cruel practices towards the birds. In a way of course this particular passage also echoes the religious education these blind persons were subjected to in the Royal Institute, for they consider those voices as coming from above and consider them as signs and proofs of God's existence. Although it seems that also here the educational discourse was internalized by the pupils, the petition still demonstrates a refusal to be curved completely along the dominant representation of persons with visual disabilities. As they were not able to enjoy the beauty of nature by means of their sight, the blind pupils had learned how to be happy by using their remaining senses. Hearing enabled them to experience nature in another way and the blinding of the birds would cause this well of happiness to dry up.

Disabled persons', and the blind in particular, role as both recipients of empathy and themselves able to empathize with others endowed them with a symbolic status in Victorian culture and literature. By being both "signs and subjects", they symbolized the transcendental quality of empathy as the foundation of human relations, because it emphasized the similarities of the afflicted and the normate (Klages 1999). The blind pupils take this a step further, extending their empathy to another species, and use their disability to argue for the kinship between human beings and animals, thus connecting the discourses on disability, pity, and animal protection.

The analysis of this remarkable petition reveals thus reveals an intricate web of emotions and interconnected subjects in the context of this remarkable fragment of heritage history: First of all it seems that the blind pupils themselves feel emotionally connected to the birds because of the happiness brought to them by their songs. Secondly, the blind pupils's petition indirectly confirms the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a divide between human beings and animals that could be transcended through experiences of suffering. Finally, in their plea to prohibit the blinding practice the blind pupils also connected themselves emotionally to the government. By calling for sympathy for their sort they urged the government to exercise political pressure.

### **A march of blinded veterans**

In the end, however, the petition of the blind pupils did not convince the Belgian government as the first official ban on blinding finches was issued during the German occupation in 1915. Blinding of birds was made punishable with a fine of 1000 German Mark or imprisonment for three months (Broeckhove, 1962). Just like in other European countries awareness of animal rights grew in Germany throughout the nineteenth century, although partly motivated not so much by concern for the animals as by anti-Semitism. As shown by Robin Judd, the Kosher butchering debate occupied an important place at the Reichstag in between 1890 and 1909 (2003; see also Arluke and Sax 1992). One byproduct of this connection between eugenics, Jewishness and chauvinistic politics was making Germany an exporter of animal protection regulations during the First World War.. After the defeat of the Germans, however, this statute became obsolete and the blinding of finches recommenced until it was finally outlawed in Belgium in 1928. Again it seems that the First World War played an important but indirect role in this process.



In an article published in 1935 in *De Vinkenier* – the official journal of the Flemish association for finch owners - C. Erfellynck, a finch owner who notably had to get rid of his birds during the occupation, looked back on the continuous attempts of those in favour of animal rights to prohibit the custom of blinding birds in particular and finch competitions in general: “During the occupation the Germans did their part in the establishment of a prohibition to catch birds or to blind them. After the war was over, many of us thought that one would leave us alone. But that turned out to be a naïve thought. The societies of animal protection were stronger than ever, and knew how to make use of the pity which caused the sight of the innumerable war blinded in order to give shape to a new and successful attack of our ancient hobby” (1935, 1; Translation PV). Just like was the case with the petition of the blind pupils, emotions seem again to occupy an important place, especially the pity towards the blinded veterans of the First World War.

Erfellynck especially blamed a march of blinded veterans against the blinding of finches for the final prohibition of the practice. Although the demonstration of the war blinded is referred to in almost every historical text to be found with regard to the history of finch sport in Flanders, we have not been able to find additional source material that could confirm that it took place. It was not mentioned in any national newspapers of the 1920's, nor in the journal published by the National Association of the War Blinded. Regardless the absence of additional historical sources the repeated reference to the event in the debates on finch sport can be said to have a twofold meaning. First of all, the repeated reference to the march of the blind veterans in the histories of finch sport seems to suggest that the arguments of pity and unhappiness used in order to prohibit the blinding of finches gained strength in the presence of those who came back from what was considered as the end of civilization: the war that had destroyed so much, killed so many, and injured even more. Although the Belgian army only counted a small number of war blinded veterans – an official list that was drawn up in 1920 mentions 88 men who were blinded in wartime – their presence was magnified through the circulation of images and the roles attributed to some of them in official commemorative events.

The Great War indeed increased the public visibility of blindness and persons with visual impairment and changed the status of disabled people including the blind (cf. Poore, 2009: 1-66; Cohen, 2001). In Belgium, awareness of the plight of the war blinded was raised, among others, through a collection of drawings by Samuel Devriendt that was sold in favour of an institute for the war blinded near Brussels. It was here that the blinded soldiers – in line with the dominant international discourse regarding the rehabilitation of invalid soldiers (Verstraete and Van Everbroeck, 2014) – would again become useful citizens and where they had to learn how to be blind in a particular way. Images like these often emphasised that these blinded soldiers should be pitied and that one should donate money in order to set up educational initiatives to teach them the skills to become independent citizens and be re-integrate into society (Durflinger, 2010; Anderson, 2013). In addition to the representation of war blindness in pictures and photographs that were distributed the war blinded also gained public visibility by their inclusion in official ceremonies that were set up in order to commemorate those who did not come back from the war. In 1922 for example an official grave was inaugurated in Brussels for the Unknown Soldier. For the official ceremony, Raymond Haesebrouck, a blinded veteran, was asked to select one of five coffins positioned next to each other at the train station of Bruges. The fact that he was chosen for picking out the coffin to be buried at the monument, also, just like in the case of the blind finches, that both blindness and persons with visual disabilities took on an important role in discussions about and practices of cultural heritage. Here, his heroic status as a veteran was paired with ancient myths connected to blind people. More than other disabilities,

blindness figures in metaphors related to knowledge, virtue, and emotion: love is said to be blind, as is justice; being blind is used as a figure of speech for being ignorant, but blind people have also been claimed to have access to deeper insights than the sighted. Since antiquity, blindness has been associated with extraordinary mental and spiritual powers. Lacking sight, blind people often figure in myths and literature as being able to “see” things that are not visible to the eye (Kleege, 2013; Gerber, 2001). Having the blind veteran - who was emotionally connected to his comrades, and whose disability related him to ancient myths - select the coffin enhanced the symbolism of the monument and charged it with emotion.

It appears that the enhanced presence of war blinded veterans in the Inter-war period boosted the political debates with regard to the blinding of birds. In 1924, two bills on the protection of animals were presented to the senate by Asou and Wittemans/Seeliger. Although they made no direct reference to the veterans, an important place was attributed to emotions, namely pity and justice towards animals. By confronting the legislator with jurisdiction in other countries where one already had laws that protected the rights of animals both Asou and Wittemans/Seeliger accused Belgium of being uncivilized. Especially the practice of blinding birds was said to be a sign of the barbarous state many habitants of Belgium still found themselves in, in Wittemans words: “The scandalous practice of blinding birds or keeping them in a cage must end. It puts us on a par with the most barbaric people” (Sénat de Belgique, Séance du 18 novembre 1924). Similarly, Asou argued: “We also must vigorously ban the odious custom of blinding birds, or subjecting animals to torture under the pretext of fighting or contests. Such practices maintain in people instincts of savagery while our entire school and social legislation tends to refine the manners and cultivate generous and charitable feelings” (Sénat de Belgique, Séance du 12 novembre 1924). In 1928, these petitions were combined and passed as legislation by the Belgian Senate. From then on people who owned blinded birds or blinded these ran the risk of being punished with a fine of 26 to 1000 francs or imprisonment of 8 days to one month (Chambre des représentants, Séance du 20 Juin 1928).

Alas, even though no reference was made to disability in the final discussions leading up to the law, it had been decisive in lending an emotional quality to the issue. Simultaneously, the encounter between blind birds and blind people points towards a shift in the symbolic interpretation of blindness as a bridge between worlds: The story of the blind veterans time and again is referred to and is presented as something that clearly belongs to the past; something that is considered so true that it does not need any other additional prove or evidence. The repeated reference to the march of the blind – and thus to the period when finches still could be blinded – seems to symbolize a reassurance, namely that we do not live anymore in a time when the border between the realm of human beings and that of disability could be breached by inflicting disabilities to animals. Blindness ceased to be a place where animals and humans again were merged and almost indistinguishable. As a consequence of the initial prohibition by the Germans, a blinded cage which was said to have the same effects on the number of times the bird sang Suskewiet was invented. Blindness thus not anymore was primordially connected to the bird itself, but became a characteristic of the cage. Not being able to see/blindness thus literally was placed in between men and animals.

In the context of the history of finch sport the worrying effect of blindness, its capacity to refer to other worlds – whether it be animal or divine – and invent new ones seem to have been replaced by the certainty and robustness of a blinded cage that was placed in between the animals and man.

## Conclusion

In this article we have presented a particular fragment of the history of a local sport that was widely practiced in Belgium throughout the nineteenth century. Nowadays, although not as popular as it used to be, the sport is still practiced in rural areas in Flanders and is officially recognized as being part of the Flemish cultural heritage. Due to the 1928 law, the birds are no longer blinded. Instead, the competitors use blinded cages, a 1920's invention designed to come to terms to the new legal context. As we have shown, the particularities of this history cannot be understood without looking at it through the prism of disability. It was the particular status as carriers of emotional symbolism that animals and disabled people had acquired that played the decisive role in the discussions about banning the practice of blinding the finches with glowing pieces of iron. Disability, of course, cannot explain in itself the particular history of this local custom. What we have tried to show is that it was the intimate interconnection of disability with emotions (i.e. happiness), education (discussions about compulsory education) and culture (Great War) that brought momentum to the criticism that already can be found at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Together with the educational preoccupation of the impact of being confronted with blinded finches on children, the agricultural argument that blinding the birds could possibly lead to the destruction of the harvest, the moral discussion about civilization and how behaving in a good way should be understood, it was the issue of blindness and the role of persons with disabilities that proved crucial in establishing the law that prohibited the blinding of finches in Belgium.

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